View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by Calhoun, Institutional Archive of the Naval Postgraduate School

Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive

Faculty and Researcher Publications

Faculty and Researcher Publications

2000

Front Men and Back Women

Simons, Anna

SAIS Review, Summer - Fall 2010
http://hdl.handle.net/10945/43186

http://www.nps.edu/library

Calhoun is a project of the Dudley Knox Library at NPS, furthering the precepts and goals of open government and government transparency. All information contained herein has been approved for release by the NPS Public Affairs Officer.

Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School
411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle
Monterey, California USA 93943

Front Men and Back Women

Anna Simons

Milosevic: Portrait of a Tyrant, by Dusko Doder & Louise Branson. New York: The Free Press, 1999. 304 pp. $25.

America's Boy: A Century of Colonialism in the Philippines, by James Hamilton-Paterson. New York: Henry Holt, 1998. 462 pp. $30.

Mandela: The Authorized Biography, by Anthony Sampson. New York: Knopf, 1999. 672 pp. $30.

On April 7, 2000, the *New York Times* printed a thirty-six paragraph-long obituary of Tunisia's former president, Habib Bourguiba. While it described Bourguiba as a leader who "did much to enhance women's rights in Tunisia," it is not until the twenty-first paragraph that we learn he had a first wife, a Frenchwoman, whom he divorced in 1961. In that same year, we are finally informed in the second to last paragraph, he married his second wife, Wassila ben Ammar, "a Tunisian from a prominent family" and someone who "came to be seen as a power within the presidency." But how much of a power? And with what consequence? How are we to know?

Often we hear about husbands and wives who act as each other's political helpmates. The most flamboyant among these power couples figure in modern morality tales, even musicals. Mention one prominent pair, like Juan and Eva Peron, and others spring to mind: the Ceaucescus, the Marcoses, the Milosevices. What sets couples like these apart from others—Mr. and Mrs. John Major, say—are the wives, women who openly, even brazenly, engage in politics,

Anna Simons is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of California Los Angeles and visiting associate professor at the Naval Postgraduate School.

sometimes to help their husbands, sometimes to hurt them. We might well wonder whether this should be allowed. The quick, rhetorical retort: who, if not their husbands, can stop them?

Three recent biographies–*Milosevic: Portrait of a Tyrant*, *America's Boy: A Century of Colonialism in the Philippines*, and *Mandela: The Authorized Biography*–should raise these as well as other questions about relations between leaders and the women they have wed, a topic that has thus far not received the attention it deserves. Indeed, scholars allude to marital power behind the throne more often than they examine the throne as a prop that is used by spouses bent on wielding power themselves. The biographies reviewed here are about leaders whose wives came to shrewdly cultivate their own sphere of power.

While leaders like Bourguiba may have married women *because of* their political connections, these three men did not. Rather, whatever networks Mira Milosevic, Imelda Marcos, and Winnie Mandela came to martial, these were networks they fashioned themselves. This suggests that these wives (if not their husbands) have some predilections in common. It could be their willingness to profit from their positions, or it could be the uses to which they put their gender, never mind their position, as each amassed power not by turning to other women but by using men. This, of course, suggests that their approach is more *feminine* than feminist.

Interestingly, only one of these three women is still married to her husband, who himself remains a head of state. One might think this would yield a surfeit of information. In *Milosevic: Portrait of a Tyrant*, however, we learn next to nothing about the content of the Milosevices' relationship beyond the fact that, on occasion, Mira Milosevic has seemed more engrossed with preserving her husband's position in power than he has. Journalists Dusko Doder and Louise Branson seem unable to penetrate beneath the surface facts. When they do, it is only to delve into pyschological speculation. Either Slobodan Milsoevic is "playing out a syndrome known as 'suicide by cop'" (which could explain his having played chicken with NATO over Kosovo) or, according to the nameless pyschologists they cite, "he lives in a narcissistic, self-centered place where he is the sun and everything revolves around him."

One can make the easy leap and assume this reputed narcissism stems from his childhood. Not uncoincidentally, perhaps, he is married to a woman whose background is thought to have scarred

her as well. Both Milosevic and his wife Mira were abandoned by their fathers, though Slobodan's eventually committed suicide. Is that more or less traumatizing than having your mother alternately portrayed as a traitress and a heroine? Either Mira's mother was shot by the Gestapo for having been a communist, or she was executed by her communist comrades for having betrayed them while in the Gestapo's hands. According to Doder and Branson, the latter is what most believe actually occurred, though Mira grew up convincing herself otherwise. Is it a small wonder then or a telling fact that on meeting each other in high school, Milosevic and Mira subsequently stuck together like glue?

Doder and Branson write that Milosevic's friends believe that Mira was not just his first, but has been his only "girlfriend." Curiously, they do not make more of this, but if true it may reveal more about their subject's character than anything else they offer. After all, Doder and Branson are writing about a man who has surrounded himself with (what we are led to believe are) venal, loot-and-booty-minded thugs. If Milosevic never succumbed to the temptations as they have, what does this say about his capacity for commitment and his ability to remain loyal to someone else, if not also to an ideal (nevermind a goal)? Might we not be mistaken to only read him as *self*-interested? And if loyalty is something he exhibits, loyalty must be something he values. It would be interesting to know, then, to what exactly he feels most loyal: *his* marriage or marriage as an institution/ideal, and if the latter, why not marriage to the nation?

If politics is a confidence game, how much better it must be when the one person you confide in sees eye-to-eye with you.

These questions are important because Milosevic is only ever portrayed as seeking power. Journalists describe him as morphing from communist to nationalist in order to build power. But power to do what and power *for* what? No one ever explains his motivation.

Instead, Doder, Branson, and others act as though it is enough to simply assert that Milosovic has been driven by the raw pursuit of power all along. Even if we were to slip down the psycho-biographical slope and presume that he does what he does to make up for what he could not or did not do in the past (or what his father could not or

did not do)—and ditto for Mira in relation to her mother—that still does not tell us what power represents or means to either one of them, and why, if that is all they crave, they crave it so badly.

For instance, it is hard to figure out to what extent the two simply seek attention. Neither Milosevic nor his wife has fashioned a cult of personality around themselves, although, as Doder and Branson point out, Milosevic has been masterful at controlling the media. It could be, too, that what he actually most enjoys is the mechanics of politicking, for which he clearly has a talent.

If politics is, to a certain extent, a confidence game, how much better it must be when the one person you confide in sees eye-to-eye with you, or at least sufficiently enjoys what you have wrought to work *with*, rather than *against* you. Then you can play both your ends against a solid middle. Does this describe the Milosevices? Mira, after all, heads her own political party, the Yugoslav United Left (YUL). Milosevic, as Doder and Branson note, thus has two groups of supporters upon which they can rely: executors loyal to him and members of his wife's circle, thus offering him (or them?) two groups to pit against each other if necessary. What could be more clever? Is this, then, the modus operandi of all "power couples?"

Doder and Branson liken the Milosevices to others who have sought to "become joint rulers in the public mind": Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, Nicholas and Alexandra Romanov, Juan and Eva Peron, Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu, and Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. But was Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos' "conjugal dictatorship" fed by the same ambitions? There seem to be a number of eerie parallels, as well as striking differences.

James Hamilton-Paterson, in his nuanced biography of Ferdinand Marcos, *America's Boy: A Century of Colonialism in the Philippines*, comments that the former president of the Philippines was largely uninterested in the material perks of power. Not so his wife Imelda, who understood what was to be gained by projecting power to impress others, namely control. Perhaps this, rather than simply megalomania, explains why Mira Milosevic has increasingly "induced Slobodan to adopt the lifestyle of Tito and his royal predecessors." Impression management can be a force multiplier. While Imelda and Mira are said to enjoy luxury, both have also demonstrated a real interest in fundamentally transforming society. How might we explain their common ambitions in this regard? We can either read it as an unlikely coincidence, or take it as a more deep-seated (dare we

suggest womanly?) congruence.

Without question, Imelda was a very worldly and public first lady. Not only did she travel widely, but she also built big. Her immortality will come, in part, from the edifices she erected. Still, as Hamilton-Paterson argues, she appeared to care genuinely about the plight of Filipinos less fortunate than herself, perhaps in remembrance of her own less-than-comfortable childhood. In contrast, Mira Milosevic's endeavours have been more cerebral and organizational in nature, as much perhaps a reflection of her doctorate in sociology as her communist upbringing.

Another difference, that also explains why Hamilton-Paterson can write about the Marcoses with some authority, is that they appear to have regarded their marriage as more of a public good than a private matter. Also, as crony capitalism intensified under Marcos' martial rule in the 1970s, fissures grew between his retainers and Imelda's supporters. Marcos favored his fellow Ilocanos (from the north), while she increasingly rewarded and relied on her relatives and fellow Leytenos. In other words, though they may each have sought to gain from their union, unlike the Milosevices (thus far), they did not act as a solidary unit.

Hamilton-Paterson credibly argues that neither Ferdinand nor Imelda was out solely for him or herself. As even Benigno Aquino noted, Marcos might have been corrupt, but he still got things done, for instance in the very tangible realm of developing the national infrastructure.

Winnie and Nelson Mandela, whom the South African government prevented from being a solidary unit, aimed at posterity in an altogether different sense, by winning international acclaim for what was regarded as an utterly selfless vision. In his lengthy reprise of what is now a familiar story, Anthony Sampson in *Mandela: The Authorized Biography* describes the Mandelas' struggle on behalf of *the* struggle, which eventually cost them their marriage, as well as a shared worldview. Betrayal was not something that either could associate with their parents, as was the case for Slobodan and Mira Milosevic, or Imelda and Ferdinand Marcos (whose father, it is rumored, was executed as a Japanese collaborator, much like Mira's mother). Rather, betrayal was a test applied to the Mandelas as adults by the apartheid regime in its increasingly desperate desire to prove either or, ideally, both corruptible.

In the end, despite Nelson Mandela's long imprisonment, it was

Winnie who was destroyed by the state. No matter how many constraints she was able to turn into opportunities, her job was vastly more difficult than either Mira Milosevic's who, it is said, helps plot her husband's impression management with him, or Imelda Marcos's, as she engaged in round-the-world diplomacy in place of, but at the behest of, her husband. Winnie Mandela not only had to make the right impression on her husband's behalf (at times) without being able to communicate with him, but also on behalf of the party for which he was martyring himself. In exchange, the ANC offered her a support network that was bound to be insufficient.

Having pursued her husband's goals for black liberation, Winnie herself wound up in jail. Held for months on end in solitary confinement, she was brutalized in ways her husband never was. In hindsight it has been said that this is when something inside her broke. For Nelson Mandela, violence was only acceptable as a tactical means against the state. By the 1980s, Winnie used it, or allowed her retainers to use it, to wreak personal revenge, as well as to assert herself in Mandela's name (as members of the Mandela United Football Club).

In Mandela's absence, Winnie became a force to be reckoned with in at least two senses. The world press treated her as his spokesperson. In this position she found herself having, but also being able to develop, her own network of supporters. In postmodern parlance, she found her voice. And so long as Mandela was imprisoned, the lack of harmony between their messages was impossible to gauge. By all accounts, Mandela idolized her in altogether unrealistic ways. But clearly he was not the only one to regard her as an icon. According to Sampson, no matter what she was accused of doing, she "remained a heroine to many ordinary underprivileged people who loved her forthright views and superhuman courage, even her extravagance." Sampson goes on to compare her to Imelda Marcos (as well as Evita Peron). In other words, he reinforces the connection.

What is different between the Marcos case and the Mandela case, though, is that Mandela eventually divorced the woman who spent more than two decades helping to burnish his image. He sacrificed his family for the sake of his nation. He could not then show undue favor to his wife once he was president and she, as his deputy minister of arts, proved to be corrupt.

In this regard, and especially when compared to the likes of Marcos and Milosevic, Nelson Mandela proved himself a citizen first and spouse second—and a national hero. Sampson's biography may

read like a hagiography for good reason. That Mandela takes great pains to offer thanks to everyone who ever assisted him only adds to his aura. As a consequence, too, it is hard to imagine a greater contrast between a man of his caliber, born to be a chief, and Milosevic, born to be an apparatchik, though one also has to wonder if Doder and Branson do not demonize Milosevic just a little too fiercely, much as Sampson may lionize Mandela a little too much.

What if, for instance, Mandela had not gone underground, had not been caught, had not been jailed, and had not been rendered all the more kingly by virtue of the studied humility of the ANC's other leaders (Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu)? In innumerable ways, prison served Mandela as the ideal proving ground. What if, instead of having had his incorruptibility tested there, he had been forced to spend more than four years living in Soweto with Winnie and their children? Arguably, she might not have gone to prison or been broken, corrupted, and radicalized. Alternatively, perhaps the strength of her will combined with his would have bent him in a different direction. According to Doder and Branson, Mira had just this effect on her husband. The life Marcos introduced to Imelda , by contrast, eventually broke her mentally, only for her to recover, recoup, and surpass him in the realm of making "friends," thus buoying them both.

In the end, despite Nelson Mandela's long imprisonment, it was Winnie who was wrecked by the state.

In other words, as much as individual personality and character might matter—with Mandela having more of the latter than either Marcos or Milosevic—chemistry must also count. After his release from prison, Winnie no longer shared Mandela's bed, thus making it easier for him to leave her. On the other hand, the Milosevices' closeness is such that the Serb president has no need to take anyone else into his confidence, leaving him in what can only appear to be complete command.

Thus far the cliche that politics makes for strange bedfellows cannot begin to capture how little we understand about power relations and power flows among political couples. Given all the conjecture about the likely quid pro quos between Bill and Hillary Clinton, this is more than obvious today in the United States. Regardless of all the ink spilled and air time devoted to the topic, their

relationship remains opaque. Nevertheless, it fits into the pattern described here. In each of the cases discussed, wives, none of whom brought political networks into their marriages, nonetheless developed visible, powerful political blocs of their own. And each used hers differently: Mira, so far, to support Milosevic, Imelda to joust with Marcos, and Winnie to defiantly go her own way. We might wonder whether the differences say more about these women, about the men to whom they hitched themselves, or about their marriages. Unfortunately, for all the information that should be available (and Imelda Marcos and Winnie Mandela have already been subjects of their own biographies), too few of the blanks have been filled. This is perhaps because, when it comes to public figures, we still tend to be overly interested in salacious rather than substantive details about their inter-personal relations.

Meanwhile, if we know too little about the interplay between these women who have openly politicked and their husbands, what about politicians who married their wives specifically *for* the networks they could bring to the table? There are even fewer accounts about them. For instance, no Somali would be wrong to argue that it was the overweaning greed of Siad Barre's wives and their kin that led to Somalia's destruction, while an even stronger case can be made that it was President Habyarimana's wife's relatives who purposely called for a genocide in Rwanda, as they became more desperate than he to retain power.

Can events in the former Yugoslavia under Milosevic, the Philippines under Marcos, or South Africa before Mandela compare? Certainly not in scale, but for anyone who has lost a loved one from political violence, yes. Reason enough, then, to study more systematically this nexus of power, positioning, and political spousehood. For instance, where would Madame Chiang Kai-shek fit? Or what of South Vietnam's Madame Nhu? Meanwhile, when the spouse of a head of state is a male, is he likely to aggrandize in the same ways? What of siblings? What of offspring? One can easily think of dissertations that could yet be written, but until then even a cursory consideration of this topic suggests an inherent danger whenever political mates are accorded the ability to publicly rally their own pools of support. This may be especially worth thinking about now as, for the first time, a first lady attempts to use political capital acquired in the White House to catapult herself into power. Is this a good thing for women? Is it a good thing for the nation? More importantly still, is this good for our political system? On the last count alone, it would seem not.